

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



CARSON McCULLERS'

The Heart Is a
Lonely Hunter

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS



THE **BIG
READ**

Carson McCullers'

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

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The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

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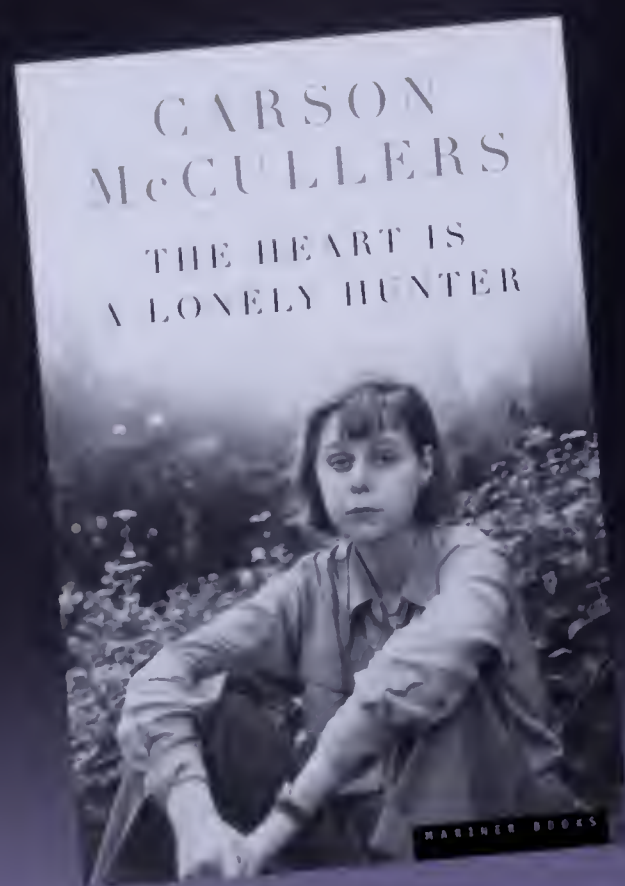
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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Suggested Teaching Schedule	2
Lesson One: Biography	4
Lesson Two: Culture and History	5
Lesson Three: Narrative and Point of View	6
Lesson Four: Characters	7
Lesson Five: Figurative Language	8
Lesson Six: Symbols	9
Lesson Seven: Character Development	10
Lesson Eight: The Plot Unfolds	11
Lesson Nine: Themes of the Novel	12
Lesson Ten: What Makes a Great Book?	13
Essay Topics	14
Capstone Projects	15
Handout One: The Golden Age of Radio	16
Handout Two: The Southern Gothic Literary Tradition	17
Handout Three: The Limits of Human Communication	18
Teaching Resources	19
NCTE Standards	20



“The town was in the middle of the deep South. The summers were long and the months of winter cold were very few. Nearly always the sky was a glassy, brilliant azure and the sun burned down riotously bright.”

—from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*



Introduction

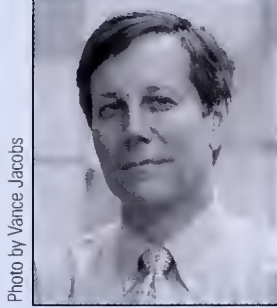


Photo by Vance Jacobs

Welcome to the Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts. Designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture, the Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Carson McCullers' classic novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Each lesson has four sections: focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, the Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why McCullers' novel remains so compelling six decades after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make these Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, the Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Dana Gioia". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dana" and last name "Gioia" clearly distinguishable.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to the Big Read CD. Write an essay on why McCullers might have chosen to begin the novel with a strong portrayal of companionship.

Homework: Part One, Chapters 1-3 (pp. 3-53).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Read Handout One. Discuss how radio might have affected the social, political, and cultural climate of the 1930s.

Homework: Part One, Chapters 4-5 (pp. 53-90).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Discuss McCullers' use of multiple points of view. Rewrite the beginning of the novel from first-person point of view.

Homework: Part One, Chapter 6 and Part Two, Chapters 1-2 (pp. 90-134).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Read Handout Two. Discuss the ways that *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* can be considered a Southern Gothic novel. Write an essay on a secondary character who serves as an antagonist to Mick Kelly or John Singer.

Homework: Part Two, Chapters 3-5 (pp. 135-181).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Describe music that sounds like "little colored pieces of crystal candy." Write a paragraph examining how the title of the novel serves as a metaphor.

Homework: Part Two, Chapters 6-7 (pp. 181-223).

*Page numbers refer to the 2000 Mariner Books edition of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Analyze the symbolism of Mick's violin, the radio, and Willie's harmonica.

Homework: Part Two, Chapters 8-10 (pp. 223-263).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Read Handout Three. Discuss the actions, reactions, and body language of each person visiting Singer's room. Examine the use of epistolary writing. Write a letter from one character in the novel to another.

Homework: Part Two, Chapters 11-13 (pp. 264-305).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Discuss the major turning points in the novel. Examine the ways McCullers integrates the lives of the characters in order to create a fictional world.

Homework: Part Two, Chapters 14-15 (pp. 305-326).

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Discuss themes of isolation, racism, and communication.

Homework: Part Three. Begin working on essays.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel.

Homework: Work on essays.

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novel.

Lula Carson Smith McCullers grew up in Columbus, Georgia, a mill town hit hard by the Great Depression. Many consider Mick Kelly, the wistful young girl in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, to be the most autobiographical character she ever created. McCullers' father worked as a watch repairman while her mother nurtured her daughter's great love for music, believing wholeheartedly that Lula Carson would one day achieve fame. And, like Mick, the tomboyish author dreamed of escaping small-town life.



Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD. To go more in depth, you might focus on the reflections of one of the commentators.

Photocopy the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Carson McCullers 1917-1967" (pp. 5-6), and "The Depression Era South" (pp. 8-9). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they have learned.



Writing Exercise

The novel begins, "In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together. Early every morning they would come out from the house where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work." Based on what the students learned from the CD, ask them to write a paragraph on why McCullers might have chosen to begin the novel with this strong portrayal of companionship.



Homework

Read Part One, Chapters 1-3 (pp. 3-53). Prepare your students to read two or three chapters per night in order to complete the book in ten lessons. The first three chapters introduce us to John Singer, Biff Brannon, and Mick Kelly.

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter was published in 1940, just as America emerged from the Great Depression, the worst economic collapse in the country's history. During the 1930s, radio became an essential part of the country's daily life. Through regional and national programming, the general public gained access to free news, music, and other entertainment.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Photocopy and distribute Handout One. Explore the music of Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Clips of many performances are available on the Internet.

Like many American households in the late 1930s, Mick Kelly's family in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* does not own a radio. Mick eavesdrops at her neighbors' windows during the warm Southern evenings, hoping to hear her favorite shows.

She learned a lot about music during these free nights in the summer-time.

When she walked out in the rich parts of town every house had a radio. All the windows were open and she could hear the music very marvelous. After a while she knew which houses tuned in for the programs she wanted to hear (p. 102).

Ask your class to imagine a world without radio, television, or the Internet. Have them write three paragraphs describing the way radio has changed our world. Encourage them to consider the social, political, and cultural effects, as well as the way radio might have affected someone in the 1930s, like Mick, who had never enjoyed easy access to music, news, and entertainment.



Homework

Have students read Part One, Chapters 4-5 (pp. 53-90). In these chapters we are introduced to two additional main characters, Jake Blount and Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland. In many ways, Copeland and Blount are parallel characters. Ask your students to think about ways in which their worldviews and philosophies of life are similar, and how they differ.

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. Often an all-knowing character, the distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter employs a third-person narrator who does not participate in the novel’s action, but has access to the private thoughts and actions of the characters. McCullers shifts perspective from one character to another using limited omniscient point of view. Third-person narration also allows the author to choose the distance from which we view the action as we are taken inside the mind of a character or shown only what we would see if we were a fly on the wall.



Discussion Activities

Each of the first five chapters is told from the point of view of a different character: John Singer, Biff Brannon, Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland. Read the section “Major Characters” from the Reader’s Guide, then discuss the ways McCullers uses the narrative lens by examining the following scenes.

In the novel’s opening lines, Singer and Antonapoulos walk “arm in arm down the street to work.” How close do students feel to the characters? Now examine the scene in Chapter 3 where Mick vandalizes the new house. “She stood in the middle of the empty room and stared at what she had done. The chalk was still in her hands and she did not feel really satisfied. She was trying to think of the name of this fellow who had written this music she heard over the radio last winter” (p.37). Do the students feel closer to Mick than they do to Singer? If so, how does McCullers achieve this? As the novel progresses, why might it become important that we feel closer to some characters than others?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character that has appeared so far. Have students rewrite the first scene of the novel in first-person point of view from the perspective of this character. What equips their character to tell the story? Have them reflect on why this story might be better told from multiple perspectives.



Homework

Have students read Part One, Chapter 6 and Part Two, Chapters 1-2 (pp. 90-134). Ask them to begin thinking about what motivates the characters. What does each of them want?

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists, in the attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to more clearly highlight certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter defies the conventions of literary fiction. The novel does not follow a straightforward, linear plot, nor does it focus most closely on the actions of a single individual. The novel examines the lives of five main characters and their struggle against isolation and despair. McCullers’ empathetic portrayal of the various personalities highlights their differences as well as the common adventure of the human experience.

McCullers intentionally crafted a composite cast of characters whose stories converge rather than focusing the reader’s attention on a single protagonist. Literary scholars debate which character, John Singer or Mick Kelly, is the true “protagonist” of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. McCullers compared Singer’s character to the hub of a wheel; most of the action of the novel revolves around him. Yet Mick Kelly’s journey toward adulthood gives the story its trajectory.



Discussion Activities

Photocopy Handout Two. Discuss the ways *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a “Southern Gothic” novel. How important is setting in the novel? Which characters are “grotesques” and what, if any, unpleasant aspects of society do they represent? Do they meet McCullers’ goal of creating grotesque characters whose physical incapacity symbolizes a spiritual void?



Writing Exercise

Choose a secondary character who serves as antagonist to either John Singer or Mick Kelly. How is this person important to the story? Does the antagonist make the main character appear stronger, or more flawed? How might this be important as the novel progresses?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapter 3-5 (pp. 135-181). Ask them to pay close attention to the passage in Chapter 5 when Mick goes to her “inside room,” and to consider what we learn about her character during that scene.

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers often use non-literal language to invite readers to visualize events, view internal conflicts, glimpse social themes, or grasp abstract concepts like beauty, truth, or goodness. An author uses figurative or non-literal language to stretch our imaginations, challenging us to decode the references and meanings bound within images, similes, metaphors, and symbols. Such devices require a reader to participate actively in the novel, as the reader begins to (implicitly or explicitly) interpret non-literal elements of the tale.

Carson McCullers' writing style tends to be straightforward and unadorned, but sometimes uses figurative language to describe emotion.

A metaphor compares one thing to another. By revealing similarity, metaphors provide insight to a character, an event, or an issue. Metaphors do not use the words "like" or "as." Here, McCullers uses a metaphor to describe Mick's private thoughts and feelings:

She sat down on the steps and laid her head on her knees. She went into the inside room. With her it was like there was two places—the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mister Singer was in both rooms. [...] The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony (p. 163).

A simile expresses the resemblance between different things, and usually begins with "like" or "as." McCullers uses a simile to describe how music, like candy, affects Mick:

There was one special fellow's music that made her heart shrink up every time she heard it. Sometimes this fellow's music was like little colored pieces of crystal candy, and other times it was the softest, saddest thing she had ever imagined about (p. 35).



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



The reader is privy to Mick's private thoughts and feelings as well as her public reactions. Why would McCullers want us to see what is in Mick's "inside room?" Ask your students to describe music that sounds like "little colored pieces of crystal candy." McCullers consciously chose to have Mick think of music as candy. Why is this comparison appropriate? What does it reveal about Mick's personality?

Metaphorical titles provide clues to a novel's meaning. Ask students to write a one-page essay on how the novel's title informs our understanding of the book. Can a person's heart be like a hunter? Is the word "lonely" important? Would another adjective (such as weary, hungry, or fierce) have the same effect? Ask them to suggest other metaphors and similes that could describe the novel or one of its characters.



Homework

Read Part Two, Chapters 6-7 (pp. 181-223). What special present does Singer give to his four friends? How does each of them react? What do their different reactions reveal about their personalities?

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols that present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to reference (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object – above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in the novel’s title, at the beginning and end of the novel, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the novel. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation of the novel.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is structured as if it were a fugue, a composition in which themes are stated by each voice in succession, building to a unified whole. From Mick’s ambition to become a professional musician, to Singer’s purchase of a radio, to the soulful wail of Willie’s harmonica, musical symbols inform the reader’s understanding of the characters and help set the overall tone of the novel. They represent characters’ feelings, motives, and ambitions.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following references to examine symbols. Students can discuss their responses in groups or craft written responses.

Mick’s violin: (Part I, Chapter 3)

Mick tries unsuccessfully to build a violin out of a broken ukulele. “It seemed to her as she thought back over the last month that she had never really believed in her mind that the violin would work. But in her heart she had kept making herself believe. And even now it was hard not to believe a little” (pp. 46-47). Discuss how the violin symbolizes Mick’s musical aspirations. How might the thwarted attempt at building the violin foreshadow Mick’s future?

Music and the radio:

Mick’s fascination with music mirrors her determination to venture beyond small-town life toward a larger world. When Singer buys a radio for his room, Mick asks if she can “come in and listen sometimes” while he is at work. How is the radio a symbol for Mick? How is it a symbol for Singer? Why would Singer buy a radio he cannot hear? What does this say about his desire to connect with the people who visit his room?

Willie’s harmonica:

Dr. Copeland’s son, Willie, always carries a harmonica. McCullers uses Willie’s “sad and empty” music to symbolize Dr. Copeland’s mood as he listens to the footsteps of his children walking away (p. 90). After Willie is hurt, does his music come to have additional meaning? What purpose does it serve?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 8-10 (pp. 223-263).

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

At the beginning of the novel, Mick Kelly, an idealistic young girl, dreams of becoming a great musician, an inventor, and a world traveler. As the novel unfolds, we witness Mick's journey toward maturity. Mick childishly frightens her brother, Bubber, after he accidentally shoots Baby, but later consoles him. When her relationship with Harry becomes sexual, Mick assures him that it was not his fault. "I wasn't any kid," she says, "But now I wish I was, though." Later, she bravely offers to quit school and take a job at a local department store to help her poverty-stricken family. By the novel's end, she assumes responsibility for payments on Singer's radio and maturely considers ways she might be able to afford a piano one day.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Read Handout Three. All the main characters experience failures to communicate. They feel isolated and alone. Each has something he or she desires above all else. Each has something he or she loves most and, by the end of the novel, each suffers a loss. Ask your students to consider the ways love, desire, and the struggle against loneliness compel the characters to act as they do.

Read aloud the section of the novel when all the characters gather in Singer's room on the same night (pp. 210-212). Look closely at the actions, reactions, and body language of each person. How do these responses help define our understanding of each?

The "epistolary" form, telling a story through the use of letters, allows an author to convey a character's viewpoint without the interference of other characters. In Part Two, Chapter 7, John Singer writes to Antonapoulos, "The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company" (p. 215). Ask your students to choose a character in the novel other than John Singer, then write a letter from this character to another person in the novel. What does their character love and hate? How does the character feel about those around him or her?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 11-13 (pp. 264-305). Ask your students to review the novel and identify two important turning points. Which characters were most affected? Why?

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. The timing of events, from beginning, to middle, to end, can make a novel predictable or riveting. A plot, propelled by a crisis, will reach a climax, and close with a resolution (sometimes called *dénouement*).

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter does not conform to a traditional plot structure. McCullers wrote the novel just as she would have composed a piece of music, arranging each voice so that the effect was a unified theme, examining the way disparate lives converge in order to attempt to understand the commonality of humankind.



Discussion Activities

Use the homework assignment from the last lesson to have students present the most important turning points in the novel. Some of the turning points are Alice's death at the beginning of Part Two; Portia telling Dr. Copeland about the amputation of Willie's legs; Singer's purchase of the radio; and Mick's decision to take the job at Woolworth's in order to help her family. Ask students to refer to key passages from the story, explaining why the turning points they identified are the most significant. How do these turning points provide a general arc or trajectory to the story? Can you identify the rising action, climax, and resolution to the story?



Writing Exercise

The novel, told from multiple viewpoints, closely examines the lives of five main characters. How does McCullers integrate the lives of these characters into the plot? Does the use of multiple narrators fail to create a coherent plot? If so, how? If not, why not?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 14-15 (pp. 305-326). In tonight's reading, your students will come to the novel's climax—the death of Antonapoulos and Singer's subsequent suicide. Without giving these developments away, ask them to consider why Singer reacts as he does. Are they shocked by his actions? Why or why not?

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Explore the statements *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* makes about the following:

- **Isolation:** “Each evening the mute walked alone for hours in the street. [...] in his face there came to be a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise. But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone” (pp.12-13).
 1. What is McCullers saying about loneliness? Is there something noble in keeping oneself apart? Why or why not?
 2. John Singer’s disability creates a communication barrier. How are the other characters separated from society? Are these things within their control?
- **Racism:** Dr. Copeland tells a group of students, “Some of you young people here this morning may feel the need to be teachers or nurses or leaders of your race. But most of you will be denied. You will have to sell yourselves for a useless purpose in order to keep alive. [...] The time will come when the riches in us will not be held in scorn and contempt” (pp.193-194).
 1. What does Dr. Copeland blame for the racist society in which he lives? Does he accept any responsibility?
 2. What values does Dr. Copeland believe will combat discrimination? What does he see as the black community’s “greatest need?”
- **Communication:** When Portia tells her father about the amputation of Willie’s legs, Dr. Copeland says, “I am deaf. [...] I cannot understand.”
 1. Why does he react in this way? What is McCullers illustrating by Dr. Copeland’s inability to accept what he has heard?
 2. Examine other examples of situations in which the novel’s characters cannot communicate effectively. Are the barriers to effective communication self-imposed, or are they influenced solely by society? Why?



Homework

Have students finish reading the novel. Ask them to begin their essays, using “Essay Topics” at the end of this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.

Lesson Ten

FOCUS:
What Makes
a Great
Book?

Novels illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.



Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. What elevates a novel to greatness? Ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does McCullers provide through the stories of the five main characters? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of McCullers' generation? How does this voice represent the Depression-era South?

Have each group choose the single most important theme of the novel. Ask a spokesperson from each group to explain his or her decision. Write these themes on the board. Are all the groups in agreement?



Writing Exercise

If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have each student partner with another to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with characteristics of a well-written essay.



Homework

Students should work on their essays. See "Essay Topics" at the end of this guide. For additional questions, see the Reader's Guide "Discussion Questions" (pp. 14-15). Turn in rough drafts for the next class.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis—that is, an assertion—about the novel. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. Mick Kelly separates her private thoughts and feelings from the ones she shares with friends and family by thinking of them as “inside” and “outside” rooms. By the novel's end she is “shut out from the inside room.” Is Mick's inability to reach this private space a necessary part of maturity? Why or why not? As she matures, has Mick given up her musical ambitions? What, if any, are the signs of hope at the end of the novel?
2. Discuss Doctor Copeland's strange relationship with his daughter, Portia. “Willie and Highboy and me have backbone,” Portia tells her father, “This here is a hard world and it seem to me us three struggles along pretty well.” Would you characterize Portia as a strong person, or a weak one? How does she treat her father? Do you feel she's fair to him? If so, why? If not, why not? How do Dr. Copeland's views of family and society differ from Portia's?
3. Of all the characters, Jake Blount is the most prone to violence and outburst. What motivates him? Are his political beliefs based on sound principles, or is he simply reacting against the social and economic challenges of the late 1930s? Is he capable of initiating the social change he proposes, rather than simply talking? Why or why not? Have students support their argument with passages from the text.
4. Throughout the novel, Singer serves as a symbol of hope to the other characters. At the end of Part One, McCullers tells us, “Mick Kelly and Jake Blount and Doctor Copeland would come and talk in the silent room—for they felt the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that” (p.94). Discuss what each character wants most, and the ways in which they project this desire onto Singer. What is the significance of Singer's name? How does his inability to speak affect the way he listens? Ultimately, does his disability bring him closer to the other characters or separate him from them? How does the way characters listen (or refuse to listen) to each other affect our understanding of them? What might McCullers be trying to say about human communication?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. Invite a historian (or someone who lived during the Depression, or the beginning of the Civil Rights movement) to meet with students to talk about the era of the novel. Prepare a collective series of questions in advance and use these as a way to generate a conversation. Have students take their new knowledge back into an interpretation of the novel. Did this information change the way they understand the novel? The discussion can take place in the library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.
2. McCullers adapted some of her novels and short stories for the stage. Find a local theater teacher-artist to work with your class. Arrange students in groups of four. One volunteer should act as director and be responsible for coaching. The other three should take on roles and act out a scene. They can use dialogue from the book, but are welcome to invent their own where appropriate, making sure to stay in character. Have students perform the scene at a local library or bookstore. After each scene, have the director explain their choices.
3. Explore the cultural period of the 1930s by creating radio shows that provide in-depth information on what was happening in the following artistic communities: music, theater, visual arts, photography, and dance. Teams of students can focus on different artistic communities, also creating advertisements that reflect the period. Perform the radio shows for an audience or record the shows to share with your community. If possible, create podcasts of these radio shows. Have classmates write reviews of the shows.
4. Mick Kelly plans a fancy party at her house. Assisted by some research, plan a party that simulates the kind of gathering kids would have had in the 1930s. Students can dress the part. Plans can include a theme, menu, music playlist, and dance styles. Vary this project by putting Mick into the current generation. What would the party entail? Use this event to celebrate the Big Read.

The Golden Age of Radio

In the darkest hours of the Great Depression, reassurance and a little distraction came from a surprising place – out of thin air. Radio, invented by the Italian physicist Guglielmo Marconi at the end of the nineteenth century, had developed into a viable broadcast medium by the third decade of the twentieth. America's first radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, went on the air November 2, 1920. By 1923 the first radio network had been set up, and by 1926 the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and Westinghouse had created the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), whose Blue and Red networks would come to dominate America's airwaves.

During the 1930s, radio became an essential part of the country's daily life. Through local and network programming, radio allowed the general public access to news, music, and other entertainment at the flip of a switch, free of charge so long as one could afford the cost of a receiver. For the first time in American history, people from all walks of life and in every region of the country found themselves participating in the same experience at the same time, whether they lived in rural communities or big cities.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president from 1933 to 1945, used radio to deliver “fireside chats” that edified and inspired the public. Nothing in the nation's history had prepared its citizens for the economic hardships of the Great Depression or the international crisis of the late 1930s, when Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese pushed the world toward war. President Roosevelt spoke simply

about issues relevant to the lives of all Americans: unemployment, the economy, national defense, and, ultimately, the need for America to enter World War II. Americans gathered around the radio and listened.

Radio sought both to educate and to entertain. Musical variety shows were popular, as were serial comedy shows like *Amos 'n' Andy*, which had a national audience estimated at 40 million – one third of the American population. Radio dramas were popular too, and the power of the new medium to persuade was thrillingly demonstrated on October 30, 1938, when the young Orson Welles produced a radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' novella *The War of the Worlds* and delivered it in the style of a live news report. Thousands of Americans who tuned in late panicked, believing Martians were really attacking America.

During this golden age of radio, broadcasters maintained a strong commitment to “high culture” in their programming. In 1937, after the celebrated conductor Arturo Toscanini stepped down as music director of the New York Philharmonic, NBC created an orchestra especially for him to lead, and began a series of regular broadcasts from Studio 8H in Manhattan's Rockefeller Center. For 17 years, until the maestro retired, these broadcast concerts were among the most listened-to programs on American radio.

The Southern Gothic Literary Tradition

Gothic fiction is a literary term for a genre whose prevailing mood is terror or suspense, whose setting is an isolated castle or monastery, and whose characters include a hero beset by mysterious or threatening forces. The predecessors to modern horror, gothic novels use ghost stories, madness, vampires, and perversity to develop a pleasant sense of fear in the reader. From the 1790s through the nineteenth century, gothic literature comprised everything from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe's macabre stories to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Only in the early to mid-20th century did such writers as Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner use it to explore less supernatural, more earthly monsters, thus pioneering what came to be called the "Southern Gothic" literary tradition.

The "grotesque," one of the key components of Southern Gothic writing, portrays deeply flawed characters, decayed, claustrophobic settings, or sinister events, often linking them to racism, poverty, or violence. Though grotesque characters or situations can sometimes be hard to take, carefully applied they allow talented writers to exaggerate their material without betraying it. The grotesque can also comment on unpleasant aspects of society without appearing overly preachy.

McCullers used grotesque characters to illuminate universal truths about the human condition. She said, "Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to

write about — people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love — their spiritual isolation."

Hasty critics eventually began applying the gothic label carelessly to all Southern fiction, mistaking every idiosyncrasy of character or setting for the grotesque. McCullers reacted against the overuse of the "Southern Gothic" label in an essay titled "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature." For her, the roots of Southern fiction were firmly planted in realism, and didn't depend on supernatural incidents or mysticism. She admired such Russian novelists as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and thought they had a lot in common with Southern writers, since citizens in both Russia and the South were defined largely by social class and their relationship to the land.

At its best, Southern fiction applies gothic elements within a framework of social realism. This fiction avoids stereotype by creating unusual characters, and imbues them with qualities that cause the reader to examine the world of the novel and the human experience more closely.

The Limits of Human Communication

In the original outline for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers described the novel as “man’s revolt against his inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible.” Not surprisingly, the delicate balance between hearing, listening, and understanding crops up again and again in the novel. Originally titled *The Mute*, the book is populated with characters who struggle to express their feelings and, for various reasons, fail. Some characters are hampered by a physical disability, while others fail at effective communication simply because they are incapable of connecting emotionally.

In the novel’s opening scenes John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos, both deaf, share a comfortable life together. After work each day, the men return to the home they share. Singer relates the day’s events to his friend through sign language, his hands forming “the words in a series of swift designs,” but the childish Greek has little to add to the conversation.

After Antonapoulos is committed to an asylum, Singer lives alone in a society in which he can’t fully communicate. The friendships he forms with his hearing neighbors are tenuous at best, in part because they, taking for granted that he will adjust to the hearing world, make little effort to accommodate him.

The longer Singer is away from Antonapoulos, the greater his sense of isolation. During his visits with Antonapoulos, Singer does most of the “talking,” with little interaction from his friend. Similarly, though the other characters talk constantly to Singer, he responds infrequently and reveals little of himself. Singer reads the lips of Jake Blount, Biff

Brannon, Dr. Copeland, and Mick Kelly, but feels little connection to what they are saying:

At first he had not understood the four people at all. They talked and they talked — and as the months went on they talked more and more. He became so used to their words he understood each word they said. And then after a while he knew what each one of them would say before he began, because the meaning was always the same.

Ordinary verbal communication in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* often results in failures and misunderstandings. Though Biff, Jake, Dr. Copeland, and Mick visit Singer for months, when they all happen to meet in his room halfway through the novel, they are incapable of communicating with each other, and address themselves “mainly to the mute.” Ironically, Singer responds by writing a long letter to Antonapoulos, though he knows his friend is “unable to make out the meaning of words on paper.”

Ultimately, none of the characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* gets through to any of the others. Human communication proves ineffective and unsatisfying. McCullers’ tender, complex portrayal of diverse characters illustrates the innate need for people to communicate. Each character yearns to share his or her inner thoughts with another person, but they fail because of the limitations they find, both in others and within themselves.

Teaching Resources

Books

Carr, Virginia Spencer. *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*. 1975. New York: Carol & Graf, 1985.

Savigneau, Josyane. *Carson McCullers: A Life*. Translated by Joan E. Howard. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

Egerton, John. *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. New York: Knopf, 1994.

Other Resources:

Carson McCullers Collection

<http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/research/fa/mccullers.hp.html>

This collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas at Austin, includes manuscripts, correspondence, and photographs reflecting the life and literary career of McCullers.

Web sites

www.carson-mccullers.com

The Carson McCullers Project. A site devoted to McCullers, including a biography, bibliography, photographs, chronology of her life, and a synopsis of many of her works.

www.mccullerscenter.org

Columbus State University's Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians is located in McCullers' hometown of Columbus, Georgia. The Center operates a museum in McCullers' childhood home and provides residencies and fellowships for writers and musicians. The Web site has photographs, a detailed biography, and a complete bibliography of McCullers' work.

www.old-time.com

Information about the development of radio programs, as well as comments on the socio-political environment of the age.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

Part of the American Memory Collection of the Library of Congress, these photographs were created by a group of U.S. government photographers. The images show Americans in every part of the nation. In the early years, the project emphasized rural life and the impact of the Great Depression.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



“The dimensions of a work of art are seldom realized by the author until the work is accomplished. It is like a flowering dream. [...] The seed of the idea is developed by both labor and the unconscious, and the struggle that goes on between them.”

—CARSON MCCULLERS
from “The Flowering Dream,”
originally published in *Esquire*, 1959

**“In a swift radiance of illumination
he saw a glimpse of human
struggle and of valor. Of the
endless fluid passage of humanity
through endless time. And of
those who labor and of those
who—one word—love.”**

—CARSON MCCULLERS

from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

**NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS**



The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest. The Big Read brings together partners across the country to encourage reading for pleasure and enlightenment.

A great nation deserves great art.



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